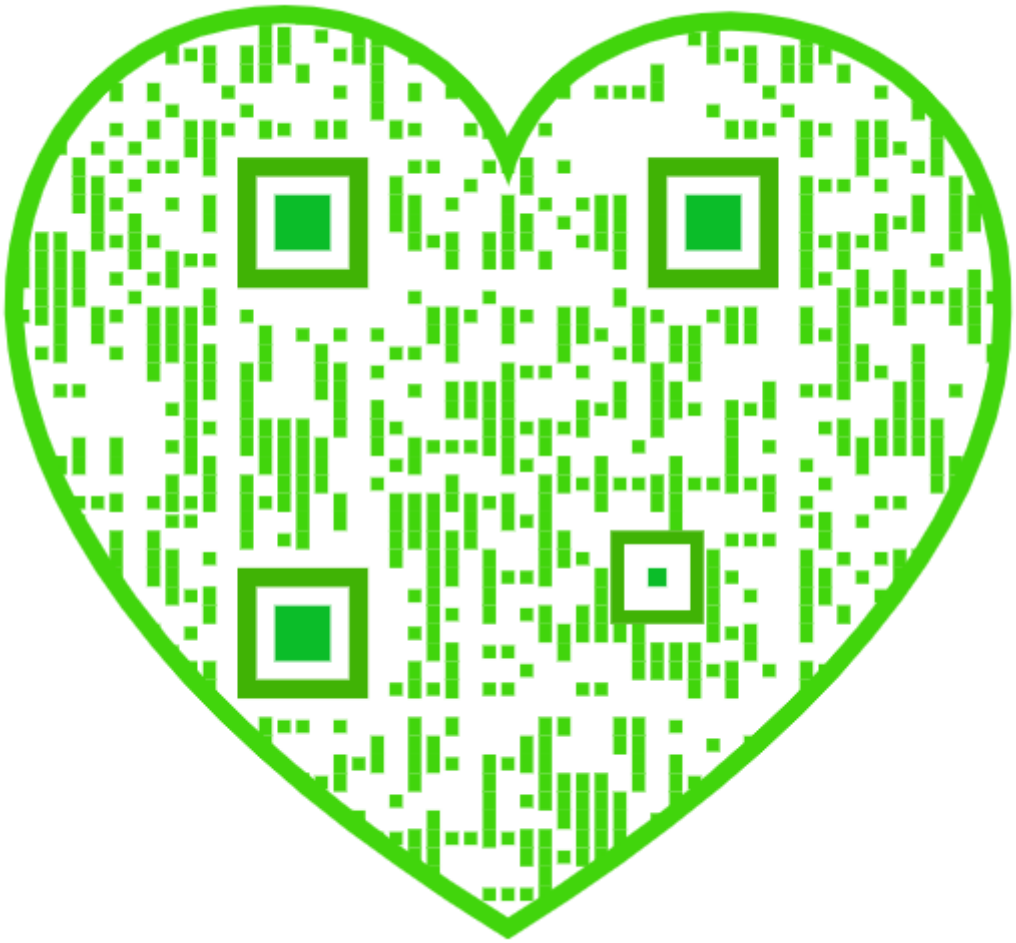
CONSIDERATIONS
ON ENGRAVING
BY TIMOTHY COLE



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# CONSIDERATIONS ON

# Engraving

BY TIMOTHY COLE

NEW YORK
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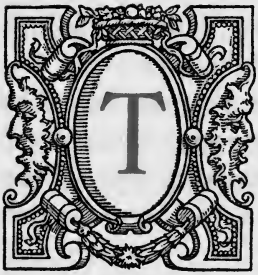
*This address was delivered by Mr. Cole at the opening view of an Exhibition of Old Prints, April* 6, 1921, *given by The American Institute of Graphic Arts and The National Arts Club. Mr. Burton Emmett, member in charge.*

# CONSIDERATIONS ON ENGRAVING



HE arts of industry and commerce are, of course, among the first pursuits in this mundane constitution of things because, naturally, without bread—without at least the gross groceries of existence—we can have but little stomach for the higher realms of fancy or imagination—for poetry and the fine arts. It is as true that man shall not live by bread alone (and he takes pretty good care that he shall not) as it is that in the sweat of his brow he shall earn it (and, in the natural order of the division of labor, his interest seems to be in letting the other fellow do the sweating). But after he awakens to the realization of the embarrassment of owning things, and that he himself is owned by a house and lot, a limousine, yacht, aeroplane, etc.—and a wife of course—he discovers he has higher wants.

He is the only creature under the sun forever exclaiming, "I want—I don't know what I want!" which absurdly healthful condition is certainly a very excellent thing. It is requisite and salutary as a promoter of business, stimulates to the owning of things, and incidentally causes the sun to shine more brightly and love to glow more fervently, if only he can keep the cash a-going, and if only he can keep his spirit up and doesn't

look backward and sigh for former good old times. "Say not," saith the Preacher, "that the former days were better than these, for thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this."

We must endeavor always and forever to keep a-going. Man's glory is in going, not in being, unless indeed his *being* finds its essential raison d'être in *going*, as a top which keeps its perpendicular state by spinning. The world spins and so do we, and the faster we spin the steadier we shall be, and it is the thinkers who are the steadiest and who do the spinning for us—of yarns mostly!

"Say not that the former days were better than these" sounds very like a note of optimism in that pessimistic book of the Preacher, but it doesn't say that these later days are any better than the former, nor does it imply that we are making any progress—forging ahead to reach finally a certain goal of unmentionable bliss, a fool's paradise where we can knock around and do nothing. We take our lesson from the suns and planets that are going forever through boundless space—lucky for us that they can keep on going and never arrive anywhere—the unthinkable thing being not that space is endless, but that it should have any end. So the true artist keeps on a-going, but never arrives.

Some there are who hit upon something and—stop a-going. But with the true artist *love* propels and *beauty* beckons eternally. He never stays to reason why, his is "but to do and die." Whether his art tends to the amelioration and adornment of life is of no immediate concern to him. If it is so, then to him it is a side issue—a by-

product. He has no time or inclination to consider the good of society. He leaves that to the socialists or the bolsheviki, and gives little heed even to pecuniary considerations—the art dealers kindly relieve him in this matter. He forgets the days—and also his creditors. He would live in eternity's sunrise.

What matters if his late hours prevent him from ever beholding the dawn when "the lark at heaven's gate sings and Phoebus 'gins arise?" What matters since he carries the sunrise within him and the vapors of the mountain dew—or some other brand. The creation that he is in the throes of delivering himself of sways him ever with the sentiment of "art for art's sake." He is a profound egoist—self-centered—the point around which all things else revolve. This virtue carries with it its own reward: "the art is to the artist and comes back most to him." The painting is to the painter and comes back most to him—and it certainly *does* come back most to him when his canvas is rejected by the jury on selection! He then finds himself in no mood to consider the pursuit of beauty as among the noblest employments and purest enjoyments of this life.

There are many who believe, and we doubtless will agree with them, that only through the power and beneficence of beauty will the world ever be saved—that the brutish element so rampant in the world and as yet insensate to its influence will be downed. We artists are, of course, the saviours, and it's probably a jolly good thing for the world—and for us in particular—that the brute is not yet entirely extinct. He keeps us on the go at any rate. The musicians are anxiously soothing his

savage breast. They've tried Bach and Beethoven, but the more modern remedies of rag-time and the jazz stuff, seem to be more calming to his nerves. The painters, who arrogate to themselves all beauty, pander to his barbaric eye for color, and give him what he wants, since he must at any cost be appeased. The drama, from Hamlet to the movies, reports great success. Poetry, by its lines, is trying new stunts on him, and even the engravers—those who, with their lines, went in for tone, seemed to have made some headway, till they discovered that nobody, least of all the brute, cared for their lines, that the only line of beauty the brute appreciated was the line of the dollar sign.

"The dollar sign is beauty's line"—as he jocosely rhymes it—and so the bank bill for his edification is still engraved by order of the government; for the brute is the government's first concern. Imagine, by the way, this government establishing a bureau for the engraving of old masters, as they have in France! And yet we call this place God's own country! But France takes the lead. It is only the brute who still sings: "Foremost of nations, Columbia stands."

Nature seems in league with art to tame the brute, for she raises up beautiful woman, the most potent factor in his amelioration. "A beautiful woman," says Emerson, "is a picture which drives all beholders nobly mad"—a sentence undoubtedly pregnant with imagination but assuming a nobility in the brute that facts generally do not seem to acknowledge. Often the brute because of the beaut does go mad, but then we account it very ignoble in him, and we blame the brute but not

the beaut. But the brute is beauty's most concern since he alone is the object that needs her saving ministrations.

There is a deeper truth in the old adage "*handsome is as handsome does*" than is generally accorded to it, for beauty that *does not*—act, that *does not*—inspire, is dead, or rather is not beauty at all. The mystery and wonder of life finds its supremest expression and charm, beyond which it is incapable of proceeding, only when functioning through beauty. Beauty undoubtedly is a spiritual influence, but whether it comes to us from without or springs up from within us, need never with certainty be demonstrated. Certain it is, however, that we react to its action according to the degree of our sensitiveness, and it is the province of art to open our eyes to the beauty in which we are immersed, to render us more tremulously sensitive and impressionable to the influence of the beautiful "in landscape and in sky and tender to the spirit touch in man's and maiden's eye."

And what is that spirit touch—the very essence of all loveliness in man or woman (lacking which all physical beauty is only humbug)—but the eye of candor? Happy indeed is the man wedded to a mate who is equally, in her turn, wedded to sincerity; whom thus fortune fixes above him as his lady, there eternally to reprove him, and whom he can love and venerate at the same time—his Madonna.

Beauty is depicted by the Greeks as riding upon a beast. The Greeks are full of symbolism, and the implication here seems to point to the fact that the spiritual is founded upon the natural, even as it grows out of, and is as inseparable from it as body and soul. The

artist, naturally, acquires first his technique before he can give body to his conceptions. Art not only rides upon technique but in it, since they are one, as force and matter, and are inconceivable as existing alone as entities.

To profess no interest in the technique of art is to have no interest whatever in art. If we take from a poem its metre, its rhythm and its words, or from an engraving or etching its lines, the conception of the one or the poetic thought of the other does not, as some opine, remain behind; there remains nothing. The poetry or engraving is born simultaneously with those lines, those words, that rhythm, and that metre. Art, therefore, like the force and matter of the physical world, is inseparable and inconceivable apart from its physical substance. Therefore, it must be emphasized also that intuition and expression, fancy and technique, or more plainly, art and matter, may be *rationally* distinguished, though not as separate elements of art, since in art they coalesce. "First the natural, afterwards the spiritual", and so must the artist have the wherewithal before he can indulge the muse. Our various art alliances have this well in view in their encouragement of the pursuit of beauty, for they instinctively recognize the fact that "money makes the mare go," or the beast move on which beauty sits.

It goes without saying that the artist must ride his beast and not be ridden by it—must guide and dominate it—for in no other way will his Pegasus, invigorated and inspired (by a little material encouragement, you know), wing him on his upward way. First the natural, afterwards the spiritual. But as the natural is only food

to the spiritual, it would be placing the cart before the horse to give the natural or material the preference over and above the spiritual. Our material appointments and laborious businesses are to the end that we may crown it all by, say, a quiet moment with a book or in the picture gallery, a lecture or a musicale, or some such spiritual treat as the present exhibition of wood-cuts and wood-engravings.

Engraving on wood is properly considered a white-line method and is in contradistinction to the black-line method employed by etchers and copper-plate engravers. Pen-and-ink drawing is black-lining but if, contrariwise, you use white ink upon black paper (as it is often employed by illustrators now, in making drawings to resemble wood engravings) you are white-lining. The white-liner thinks in terms of white lines, letting the black that is left take care of itself, but the reverse is the procedure of the black-liner. The latter is occupied in darkening his surface, while the former works by lightening his. Both are opposite roads leading to the same result in the end, though the white-line method is nature's way, for the sun in rising lightens up a darkened world.

Now the old wood-cut of the Albert Dürer type is properly styled a *wood-cut* and should not be confused with engraving, since its technical manipulation, being so very different, as we all know, places it in the category of wood-carving rather than engraving. The lines were drawn on the wood (the grain of which ran lengthwise in plank form) with a finely pointed brush or quill

pen, and ink. The surface of the wood (pear tree generally) must have been sized to prevent the ink of the pen from spreading and running in the grain. The lead-pencil was not yet invented. The lines drawn could not have been of a uniform blackness as when printed, but the artists of that time did not look for an absolute reproduction or facsimile of their lines as a modern artist would call for. They wanted good, bold lines that would print up brilliantly, as may be seen in the Apocalypse by Dürer, than which nothing more impressive of its kind exists—respecting the best printed examples. The printing ink of these is a jetty black, and in consequence the white interspaces of the lines, as well as the blank white spaces of the clouds and other broad highlights, gleam with scintillating brilliancy and contribute powerfully to the majestic and awe-inspiring character of the illustrations.

The wood-cutters of these lines used little blades like pen-knives, with which they outlined the drawn lines and, digging away the wood from between them, left the lines in relief like type. This was a species of wood-work midway between carving and engraving. When later artists began to use lead-pencils in drawing or facsimile hatching, the grey lines that might accidentally be made were engraved as solid black ones; if they happened to be broad grey lines mixed with blacker ones, the breadth of the grey ones was merely thinned in the engraving to obviate any undue heaviness that might otherwise ensue in the printing. Such was the recognized practice: grey lines were not engraved as grey lines, but as black ones, only made thinner. If a mod-

ern artist's lines were so treated, he would receive a surprise in the printed result.

I remember the first facsimile drawing I had to engrave was by Reinhardt, beautifully worked up with admixtures of grey delicate hair lines, broad, soft pencilings crossed and interlined by blacker and deep black ones, all of which I was determined to render as faithfully as possible, come what may—for I knew I was transgressing the established formula. The engravers were amused as at a joke, but the artist was delighted and that was all I cared for, except the commendation of Drake, as it was the first block I engraved for the Century Magazine (then Scribner's). When this, however, and other examples of the kind I did, were shown to Millet—the great Frenchman—he shook his head depreciatingly and remarked, "ce n'est pas la grande manière." Millet preferred the old style because it gave a rugged grandeur to the finished work.

There are fashions in art as in dress and everything. Nothing seems to stay put. We are in a state of continual flux and transition. We change because conditions change and then we in turn react on conditions: action and reaction are incessantly at play. The line was the engrossing feature of the white-liners from the time of Bewick down to about the period of the latter half of the nineteenth century. The mysteries of light and shade, delicacy of values and suavity of gradation were problems that did not occupy them as it did the later men. They were satisfied with a general effect of black and white so long as the line evinced directness of purpose, self-expression, and a sort of virile dexterity.

To modify, soften, or tamper in any way with the line when once cut was deemed well-nigh sacrilegious. Even to cross a white line with another was against the established creed. This crossing, however, was later admitted, but only for the purpose of giving a skin-like quality to flesh in portraits. The modern men now use cross white-lining for any desired nuancing of light or texture. In those old days orthodoxy demanded a certain kind of line for sky, another for flesh, hair, foliage, drapery, water, rock, the bark of trees, foreground, background, etc.; all full of meaning and beautiful in themselves, and, as evidenced in many fine examples of the time, worthy of preservation.

The apprentice was schooled in these textures, just as the apprentices of the early primitive painters learned how to draw the various parts of the human body or as a shoemaker learned his trade. Engraving was properly a trade; some apprentices succeeded as sky and foliage cutters (they were called pruners); others as coat or drapery cutters (they were the tailors); the more advanced did flesh cutting (they were styled the butchers). I myself succeeded in cutting machinery and the sides of houses. I was a mechanic.

In those days the popular illustrated weeklies brought out large page engravings and sometimes double-page illustrations. On these large blocks the subject to be engraved was drawn by a draughtsman in India-ink washes reinforced by lead-pencil hatching. The blocks, being made in sections bolted together, were unbolted when the drawing was completed, and the parts divided among several engravers, who, sometimes, when a rush was on,

would work all night and have their several parts finished by the morning. The parts were then re-bolted together and a master engraver finished the joining of the several parts, uniting the work in one whole. There was no art in it; the engraver was but an artisan. A hardness characterized the work. Such a quality as the softness of painting was never met with in the best work of the masters of that time.

Now a vigorous and enthusiastic lot of young American painters returned to New York fresh from the Paris ateliers, imbued with the new truths of the great Barbizon school of painters; and it became apparent that the old conventions were inadequate to a sympathetic rendering of their works. The line had to be tampered with in order to faithfully render the qualities characteristic of each artist's manner. In other words, the painting came to be deemed more important than the exploitation of the engraver's skill in the production of lines. The engravers discovered that no one valued lines except themselves. All the old conceptions of producing textures—a certain sort of line for this and another sort of line for that—had to go. Photographing on wood now superseded the draughtsman's delineation, so that the engraver had the actual touch of the artist he was to interpret confronting him by this means.

Wood-engraving now took a higher flight. Controversies were not wanting. The older men who clamored for drawings on wood vehemently assailed the new departure. The publishers warmed to the fray and supported, with the artists and the general public interested in art, the new movement. Polemics filled the air, but

the young men finally won out. A sincere emulation arose between the engravers, and this was encouraged by the Century Magazine. Harper's Magazine followed in its wake, and the movement spread to England, France and Germany.

Deeper and more vital questions now confronted the engraver than ever perplexed the masters of earlier schools. A certain orchestration of color was demanded —greater depth, breadth, softness, flatness of planes, brilliancy, luminosity, and atmosphere—all involving a more subtle sense of tonal gradations and a completer apprehension of values than was ever displayed by the old school. In a word, wood-engraving became no longer engraving per se, but painting; and, because of the need of interpreting this deeper artistic feeling, the technical difficulties of the engraver were increased manifold. His art, no longer being subjected to the past closely defined limitations, he was expected to produce hitherto undreamed-of effects by developing to the utmost the resources of his medium.

We used to hear much of original engraving. An engraver would make an engraving from his own drawing, which was styled an original engraving to distinguish it from one made after some other artist's design or painting. But it should be clear that every engraving is an original engraving and therefore an original work of art, whether done from the engraver's own drawing or painting or from an old master canvas: and to translate with skill is to create a new work of art. Apropos of the discussions and agitations naturally incident to the break between the old men and the young of the period about

1880, I received on my return to America after an absence of twenty-seven years, the following lines, from one of the last adherents of the old school, which brought the whole thing back as in a dream, which he entitled the "Old Wood-cut to the New" and to which I responded in like manner with "The New Wood-cut to the Old."

### THE OLD WOOD-CUT TO THE NEW

My fine friend, do not despise me because I am old;
Although the lines on my face are coarse and bold,
Many are the happy faces who have looked upon me,
And perhaps full as many as you will ever see.

To the New School they tell me you belong,
While I to the old one that has passed and gone,—
Yet to you let me meekly say,
Look not so proud,—you will have your day.

And as you much younger may be,
I should think you a new process could see
Which is rapidly replacing both the Old and the New,
And, being much cheaper, will soon do away with you.

Although you boast a progenitor as grand
As ever engraved in this or any other land—
"Little Tim Cole," yet I to a name prized by many as gold,
A. Anderson, America's Pioneer Engraver, who died, 95 years old.

T. D. SUGDEN.

### THE NEW WOOD-CUT TO THE OLD

How came you to think, my father grown old,
That from you I shrink, disdainful and cold?
Should art, my dear fellow, thus cause us to stumble,
And not make us mellow, kind-hearted, and humble?

'Tis a thing for regret that a wrong in your head
Should have caused you to fret all these years that have fled.
Am not I thy true kin, reared under thy thatching?—
The son of thy burin, line, stipple, cross-hatching?

I've little to boast of peculiar to me,
For much that I've most of is borrowed from thee;
From thee came the textures—those weavings so nice;—
All those subtle flexures that give our work spice.

You taught me the graving of rock, sky, and mountain,
The tree in its waving, the plash of the fountain.
The distance you'd expound to soften with care,
And plough up the fore-ground with vigorous share.

The tooling of flesh!—O the mystery deep!—
The wonderful mesh of the lines in their sweep!
The eye, with its pupil, and bright spot of light!
Here no line was futile, all circled aright.

O happy those years of first problems solving!
E'en then new ideas in the air were evolving;
The photo, scarce heeded, in infancy stood,
But soon superseded the drawing on wood.

Well, Line, then, you gave us, in the Line lay your art;
'Twas Time, then that bade us to forward our part.
For mark, the times altered (as this golden age
Of cutting lines faltered), and turned a new page.

Are not all things growing, and hence new creations?
Evolution is showing their sequent relations;
Thus old forms decay, giving newer ones birth:—
That the old must give way is the law of this earth.

To proceed: the change found you in many things halting;
Your forms were unsound, you had "values" revolting;
"No atmosphere," "rocky," "too coarse," "stiff," "prosaic,"
Your softness was "flocky," your hardness "archaic."

You cut up the "masses," lost "breadth" and "repose;"
It put you with asses, and turned up its nose.
It flouted your technique, pronounced you hair, "hairs,"
"Old fashioned and antique;"—'t would none of your wares.

A field of white clover, for instance, you'd turn
To a foaming white river!* The artist would burn
With fierce indignation, and damn your presumption,—
Such breadth of translation, he cursed with consumption.

You struck back in thunder, the taunts you withstood;
This was your worst blunder, and did you no good.
Like the Oak you stood fast in the storm and were broken;
We bent with the blast, so the Reed be our token.

It found thee defective; you could not atone;
We learned the corrective, and for this alone
We merit distinction, fulfilling a need;
Why then should extinction be only our meed?

Farewell, then, old teacher; tho' coarse be thy face,
I see in each feature full many a grace;
In the temple of Fame may you have a safe niche,
And if I'm by the same I'll forever be rich.

"Little Tim Cole."

* An instance with W. J. Linton, in my recollection.

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